

Fall 2026

Marco Polo and His Book of Travels

HUMA1676

3 Credits

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Course Description

Marco Polo is the world's most famous traveler and we all have heard something about him and his travels to China. Marco Polo stands for the first direct contact between Europe and China in the Age of the first Eurasian Globalization under the Mongol Empire, the model of East-West exchange. Yet everything known about him comes from his book, which was written more than 700 years ago and whose reliability has been often questioned. This course will introduce students to the text, his two authors and the wider historical context surrounding the travel and its written account. At the end of the course students will have acquired a deeper understanding of cultural exchange between Europe and China in the Middle Ages as well as in later periods, and know the answers to questions such as "Did Marco Polo go to China?" and "Did Marco Polo bring spaghetti back to Europe?".

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Analyze the cultural, economic, and political factors that shaped early travel and cultural encounters between East Asia and Europe.
2. Collaborate in groups on the analysis, discussion and evaluation of Marco Polo's travels and cultural encounters; and present the findings and arguments
3. Produce a critical narrative to communicate ideas about Marco Polo's travels and cultural encounters.

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Mid-Term	35%	Week 9
Group Presentation	35%	Week 12 and 13
Course participation	30%	Weeks 1-13

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Mid-Term	ILO1, ILO3	Closed-book, in-class examination lasting 1 hour and 20 minutes. Students will be asked to answer multiple-choice questions and complete a series of short essay questions based on the lectures and assigned readings. This task assesses students' ability to analyze the cultural, economic, and political factors that shaped early travel and cultural encounters between East Asia and Europe (ILO1) and produce short critical narratives to communicate ideas about Marco Polo's travels and cultural encounters (ILO3).
Group Presentation	ILO1, ILO2	Students are organized into smaller groups (5 to 7 people per group) to make presentations. Topics and content should be relevant to the class content and discussion. The team members should be clearly divided into their respective roles and each contributed to the presentation. The presentation and reflection assess students' ability to compare travel, travel writing and East-West encounters across different periods and civilizations (ILO2) and analyze different outcomes of travel and cultural encounters (ILO1).
Course participation	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3	Students are required to attend classes, do presentations on readings, participate in class discussions, ask questions and respond to classmates' presentations. Through individual and group activities students will analyze early travel and cultural encounters between East Asia and Europe (ILO1), discuss and evaluate Marco Polo's travels and cultural encounters (ILO2), communicate ideas about Polo's travels and cultural encounters (ILO3).

Grading Rubrics

Detailed rubrics for each assignment will be provided. These rubrics clearly outline the criteria used for evaluation. Students can refer to these rubrics to understand how their work will be assessed.

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter, expertise in problem-solving, and significant creativity in thinking. Exhibits a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration, going beyond core requirements to achieve learning goals.
B	Good Performance	Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main subject matter, competence in problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and evaluate issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Possesses adequate knowledge of core subject matter, competence in dealing with familiar problems, and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows persistence and effort to achieve broadly defined learning goals.
D	Marginal Pass	Has threshold knowledge of core subject matter, potential to achieve key professional skills, and the ability to make basic judgments. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter and lacks the necessary problem-solving skills. Shows limited ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals. Does not meet the threshold requirements for professional practice or development in the discipline.

Course AI Policy

Students can use generative artificial intelligence tools to facilitate the research of materials and revise the PPTs and texts, but cannot use them to write assignments.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Week	Topics	Outlines and readings
1	Introduction: Who is Marco Polo and Did He Actually Go to China?	Introduce the historical facts about Marco Polo and historical premises of his travels Reading assignments Jackson 1998 Rossabi 2012 ch 1-2 Website: Marco Polo's travels https://mostre.museogalileo.it/framauro/en/cosmography-and-sources/cosmographic-sources/problems-in-natural-philosophy.html
2	Venice and the Medieval Mediterranean	Present European commercial expansion and Mongol military conquest at the two sides of the Silk Road Reading assignments: Paine 2015 ch. 12 Rossabi 2012 ch 3 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , Prologue, pp. 3-16
3	The Medieval Middle East in Crisis	Introduce developments in the Islamic world and Inner Asia under Mongolian conquest and rule Reading assignments: Jackson 2017 ch. 2 Rossabi 2012 ch 3 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 1, pp. 17-29 (Anatolia and the Caucasus)
4	The Mongols and Eurasia	Introduce land and maritime contacts between East Asia and Europe Reading assignments: Di Cosmo 2023 Paine 2015 ch. 13 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 1, pp. 29-45 (Persia)
5	Land Silk Road	Explore the land path from Europe to East Asia and the conditions of trade and travel Reading assignments: Kuroda 2023 Haw 2006, ch.6 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 2, pp. 45-66 (From Persia to Karakorum)
6	Medieval Fake News: The Tartars and Prester John	Introduce cultural and religious diversity and legends at the eastern end of the land silk road Rachewiltz 1972 Elverskog 2023 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 2, pp. 66-86 (From Karakorum to Beijing)
7	The Great Khan	Introduce Khubilai Khan, his rule and Marco Polo's representation of it Kinoshita 2024, ch. 2 Luo 2024 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 3, pp. 87-140 (Khubilai Khan)
8	Marco Polo in China (1) The North and the South-West	Explore the route followed by Marco Polo in North and South-West China and his information about the Imperial Court Reading assignments: Haw 2006, ch. 7 Wade 2009 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 4, pp. 140-174 (From Beijing to Bengal)
9	Marco Polo in China (2) Southern	Explore the route followed by Marco Polo Southern China and examine his description of urban life in the light of Chinese sources and evidence

	Metropolis: Hangzhou and Quanzhou	Reading assignments: Gernet 1962. ch. 1 Haw 2006, ch. 8 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 5, pp. 175-224 (From Beijing to Quanzhou)
10	Maritime Silk Road 1	Explore the sea routes connecting East Asia and Europe Reading assignments: Buell 2022 Park 2022 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 6, pp. 225-245 (From China to India)
11	Maritime Silk Road 2	Explore the sea routes connecting East Asia and Europe Reading assignments: Rubiés 2000 ch. 2 Kinoshita, 2024, ch. 3 Marco Polo, <i>The Travels</i> , ch. 7, pp. 247-282 (India)
12	Presentations and Wrap Up	Final Presentations
13	Presentations and Wrap Up	Final Presentations

Required Texts and Materials

Details (title, author, publisher, publication year, web address etc.)	
1	Buell, Paul, "Maritime Silk Route: The Mongols and the Indian Ocean," in Timothy May and Michael Hope, eds., <i>The Mongol World</i> , Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2022, 458-467
2	Cattaneo, Angelo (curator), <i>Fra Mauro's world map</i> (extremely rich multilingual repository on Early Modern Exploration) https://mostre.museogalileo.it/framauro/en/
3	Di Cosmo, In: Biran M, Kim H, eds. <i>The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire</i> . Cambridge University Press; 2023, pp. 779-797
4	Elverskog J. Religious Exchange. In: Biran M, Kim H, eds. <i>The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire</i> . Cambridge University Press; 2023:525-549
5	Gernet, Jacques, <i>Daily Life in China, on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276</i> . Stanford University Press, 1962. ch. 1, The City (pp. 22-59)
6	Haw, S. G. <i>Marco Polo's China: a Venetian in the realm of Khubilai Khan</i> . Routledge, 2006
7	Jackson, Peter, 'Marco Polo and his "Travels"', <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> 61 (1998), pp. 82-101
8	Jackson, Peter, <i>The Mongols & the Islamic World: From Conquest to Conversion</i> . Yale University Press, 2017, Ch. 2 "The Islamic World and Inner Asian Peoples down to the Mongol Invasion" (pp. 46-70)
9	Jackson, Peter, 'Marco Polo and his "Travels"', <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> 61 (1998), pp. 82-101

10	Kinoshita, Sharon. <i>Marco Polo and his world</i> . Reaktion Books. 2024.
11	Kuroda, Economic Exchange: Money, Markets, and Taxation in Mongol Eurasia In: Biran M, Kim H, eds. <i>The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire</i> . Cambridge University Press; 2023, pp. 488-524
12	Luo Wei, On Some Designations Used in the Description of the World and the Political Attitude of Marco Polo, in Hans Ulrich Vogel and Ulrich Theobald (Eds.) <i>Marco Polo Research: Past, Present, Future</i> , Tübingen Library Publishing 2024, pp. 385-416
13	Paine, Lincoln P. <i>The Sea and Civilization : A Maritime History of the World</i> . Vintage Books, 2015, ch. 12 (pp. 316-345)
14	Park, Hyunhee, Mapping and exploration, in Timothy May and Michael Hope, eds., <i>The Mongol World</i> , Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2022, pp. 719-735
15	Polo, Marco, <i>The Travels</i> , trans. Nigel Cliff, Penguin, London 2015
16	Rachewiltz, Igor de. <i>Prester John and Europe's discovery of East Asia</i> . Canberra : Australian National University Press 1972
17	Rossabi, Morris. <i>The Mongols: a very short introduction</i> . Oxford University Press, 2012
18	Rubiés J-P. Marco Polo's India and the Latin Christian tradition. In: <i>Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625</i> . Past and Present Publications. Cambridge University Press; 2000, ch.2 (pp. 35-84)
19	Wade, Geoff. 'An Annotated Translation of the Yuan Shi Account of Mian (Burma),' in <i>The Scholar's Mind: Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Mote</i> , Hong Kong, 2009, pp 17–42.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.